



**Statement of Joan Kuriansky, Executive Director**  
Hearing on Social Security at 75 Years: More Necessary Now than Ever  
July 15, 2010

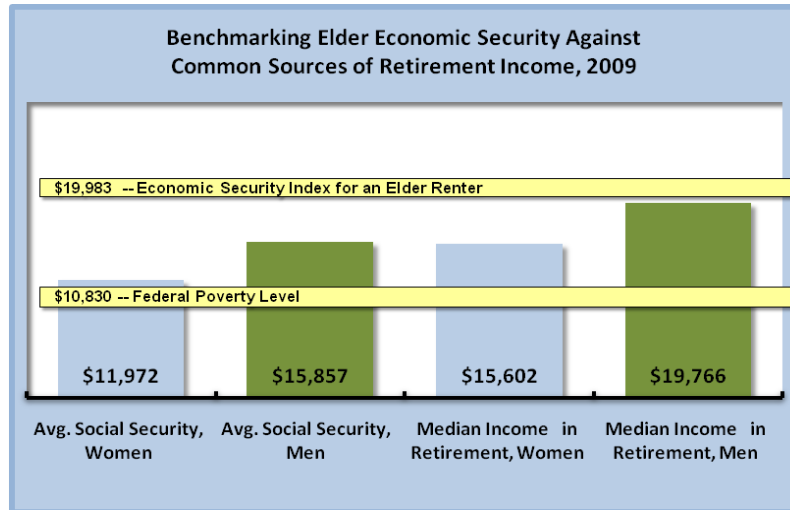
This statement is submitted to the House Ways and Means Committee hearing record on behalf of Wider Opportunities Women (WOW), a national advocacy organization with over 45 years of experience promoting economic security for women and their families throughout their lifetime. Through research, organizing and advocacy WOW works to promote policies and programs that allow Americans the opportunity to be able to meet their daily needs of living and prepare for a secure retirement.

Through its national programs, WOW works with coalitions in nearly forty states representing over 2,500 advocates, service providers, policy makers, administrators, labor groups and others to promote economic security over the life span. With respect to Social Security, WOW brings expertise and research related to the question of *benefit adequacy*, namely the extent to which Social Security contributes to the economic security of older Americans.

Although never intended to be the sole source of income in retirement, Social Security represents all or most of many elders' income, particularly for older women. Women disproportionately rely on Social Security benefits and are almost twice as likely to age into poverty. In fact, three in ten older adults rely on Social Security for more than 90% of total income in retirement and two out of five older women have only Social Security income. Without Social Security, nearly half of all seniors would live in poverty.

WOW's Elder Economic Security Initiative offers a conceptual framework and concrete tools to assess the adequacy of Social Security in helping elders achieve economic security. Underpinning the Initiative is the Elder Economic Security Standard Index (Elder Index).<sup>i</sup> Drawing from national and state data sources, the Elder Index provides county-by-county data on the real cost-of-living for elders living in the community. The Elder Index incorporates the cost of housing, health care, transportation, food and other basic needs, including the cost for home and community-based long-term care for those who require it. Further, the Elder Index is specific to household size, geographic area and life circumstances.

In 2009, the average Social Security benefit for an older woman amounted to just under \$12,000 compared to \$15,600 for an older man. According to 2009 national averages of the Elder Index, a single senior renter requires nearly \$20,000 annually to make ends meet in retirement. Thus, average annual Social Security income provides an older woman renter with only 60 percent of the income required to achieve economic security, compared to 78 percent for an older man.



Social Security Administration, Annual Statistical Supplement, 2009. Values Inflated using SSACOLAS. US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2008 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, values inflated using CPI; Laura Henze Russell, Ellen A. Bruce, Judith Conahan and Wider Opportunities for Women, The WOW-GI National Elder Economic Security Standard: A Methodology to Determine Economic Security for Elders (Washington, DC: Wider Opportunities for Women, 2006), values inflated using CPI.

Homeowners who have paid off a home require a little over \$16,000 to meet basic needs, whereas homeowners still paying a mortgage need about \$24,100. Even for those who own their own home outright, average Social Security benefits do not provide enough to make ends meet. Those relying solely or primarily on Social Security must make difficult sacrifices among basic needs, such as choosing between food, prescription medications or energy bills to warm or cool their homes.

Our nation's workers and retirees ought to have access to multiple sources of income, through Social Security, pensions, individual retirement accounts and/or wages that allow them to age in place and meet their needs over the life course. The data provided above suggests not only that Social Security should be protected, but also that its benefits should be strengthened to promote the economic security of all elders.

The data makes clear that strengthening Social Security is good policy, and recent polling data conducted by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare<sup>ii</sup> suggests overwhelming public support for protecting and improving benefits. According to the poll of the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, "Virtually all Americans polled believe that Social Security funds belong to the people who contributed them and their beneficiaries and that Social Security is a promise made to all generations that should not be broken." Polls conducted by the National Academy of Social Insurance demonstrate that these views hold true regardless of age, race and ethnicity or gender.

Given the data on benefit adequacy provided and the American public's clear commitment to Social Security, Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) strongly opposes changes to Social Security that would decrease benefits, either for today's or tomorrow's retirees. Social Security benefits ought to be safeguarded for beneficiaries across the age spectrum and made solvent through solutions that do no harm.



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<sup>i</sup> The Elder Economic Security Standard™ Index (Elder Index) was developed by Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) and the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

<sup>ii</sup> Polling results from the National Academy of Social Insurance and the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare available online at: [http://www.nasi.org/sites/default/files/research/SS\\_Brief\\_032.pdf](http://www.nasi.org/sites/default/files/research/SS_Brief_032.pdf); [http://www.nasi.org/sites/default/files/research/Economic\\_Crisis\\_Fuels\\_Support\\_for\\_Social\\_Security.pdf](http://www.nasi.org/sites/default/files/research/Economic_Crisis_Fuels_Support_for_Social_Security.pdf); [http://www.ncpssm.org/news/archive/poll\\_ss\\_deficit/](http://www.ncpssm.org/news/archive/poll_ss_deficit/).